

The Bozo languages of eastern central Mali are a high priority for documentation. There are no full grammars (including tonology, which plays a big role). These are the classic fishing people of the Middle Niger River and its seasonal floodplains, with a rich traditional culture complementing those of sedentary Dogon and Bambara, Fulbe cattle herders, and cosmopolitan Songhay. Bozo culture needs to be documented both linguistically (texts, lexicon) and through documentary videos (fishing, fish drying, net-making, boat-building). Fieldwork is proceeding in spite of the unfavorable security situation in the zone. This talk focuses on the largest-population Bozo language Jenaama (previously Sorogaama). Two varieties at the extremities of what is probably a dialect chain are compared, one in the riverine Djenné area, the other in a millet-farming area on the western cliffs of the Dogon plateau. (The plan is to tackle Kelenga and Teyaxo over the next two years.)

Most Jenaama tonal processes involving adjacent words are of two kinds. In the first, both input elements surface with their independent tones, except for tone sandhi at their boundary, chiefly dissimilatory raising (LL#L → LH#L). This is typical of possessor-possessum and N-Num pairs and of one type of (loose) N-N compound. Another set of pairings undergoes Tone Leveling: the leftmost tone of the first element spreads rightward to the boundary, and continues to the end of the second element if the latter's independent form has level tones (all-L or all-H). Thus input LHL#H is realized as all-L, and input HL#L is realized as all-H. If the independent form of the second element has an HL tone sequence, this stops the rightward progression of Tone Leveling. Tone Leveling is typical of N-Adj and a second type of (tighter, more lexicalized) N-N compound.

Cliffs has three fully phonemic tone levels (H M L), Djenné has two (H L), but makes strategic use of mid pitch (upstep of L, downstep of H). How many tones did Proto-Jenaama (and Proto-Bozo) have? Comparative linguistic but also socio-geographic factors are relevant to this issue. Djenné Jenaama is spoken in a riverine spread zone where many Jenaama are bi- or multilingual with bitonal Bambara and sometimes with nontonal Fulfulde and Djenné Songhay. This makes tone simplification plausible historically. Cliffs Jenaama is more isolated, neighboring the reclusive Bangande people, whose genetically isolated language Bangime is the only other known three-tone-level language in the immediate zone. There is currently no Jenaama-Bangime bilingualism because the Bangande now practice Dogon-Bozo cousinage (no intermarriage) and use Fulfulde as lingua franca. However, we cannot exclude closer interaction including bilingualism in the past. On balance, current evidence slightly favors reconstruction of a three-tone Proto-Jenaama system, but a definitive answer will have to wait.